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ABSTRACT

Most language teachers have been trained to teach adults. Because children learn languages quickly and well, their teaching demands more energy, quick thinking, and materials than does the instruction of adults. An essential element of successful language teaching with children is to understand their perspective, both physical and intellectual. Curriculum should be drawn from the regular grade-level classroom and contain information accessible to them. In the first class, the teacher should discuss with the children why they are there, what a foreign language is, where the target language country is, and that things are done somewhat differently there. Physical activity contributes to the language learning process, and children can use their natural affinity for rhythm and rhyme to learn language patterns and vocabulary. Rhyming, contrasting, playing simple games, singing, and otherwise playing with words are effective language learning activities. Exercises using children's imagination and talent at playing roles help involve them in classroom communication. The content and creativity level of the activities should match that of the children. Humor is also an effective tool for teaching and learning. Teaching children things they can say to impress adults enhances their pride in accomplishment. Examples are offered in French. (MSE)

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FOREIGN LANGUAGE AND THE YOUNGEST LEARNER:

HOW TO BEGIN

(EXAMPLES IN FRENCH)

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Maureen Regan-Baker

Children are so easy and so hard to teach: easy because they want and love to learn; easy because the rewards are so great and the feedback so honest and so immediate. They learn so quickly and so well. Yet, paradoxically, it is also hard to teach children because they learn so quickly and so well, more quickly than we can design and supply materials to support their learning. The teaching of children demands more energy and thinking-on-your-feet than is routine in even the most dedicated professional. Children are, additionally, usually more creative and always more active than their FLES, nés high school teachers. But they are only hard to teach when you don't know how. (They are children and we have been trained to teach adults.) And the hardest thing of all for most of us is simply to begin. Some basic rules, the acceptance of some fundamental premises can

make beginning and continuing not only easy and fun but productive.

TO TEACH A CHILD, BE A CHILD

The child is neither a watered-down adult nor an adolescent in miniature. To teach a child, be a child; walk more than a mile in her moccasins; see the world through his eyes. If you are more than three feet tall, get down, sit on a small chair, teach on your knees. Be aware of what children learn and how they do it. There is a tendency to teach a child what is taught to the older student but to cover less. In fact, the child is capable of learning an amazing amount of material and learning it well. Curriculum and methodology for FLES, like immersion, should be drawn from the regular grade-level classroom. Talk to the school librarian, to the gym and music teachers.

Eat in the school cafeteria; hang out on the play ground.

The child needs a base on which to build, so supply it. Work from the child's world--from what she/he knows. In E.D. Hirsch's Cultural Literacy there is a discussion of a study by Krauss and Glucksberg (1977) in which novel shapes were shown to adults who were asked to describe them. The task was completed easily by those adults who participated. Later, the experiment was tried out with children who, perhaps surprisingly, did not perform well at all. The researchers concluded that the reason the children did so poorly was not because of the level of their cognitive development but, rather, because they lacked information and, additionally, "an instinct for what will and will not be shared in the wider culture." (In Hirsch, 1987, pp. 65-69.) Learning at all levels

is facilitated through association and is maintained through schemata. It is the teacher's responsibility to provide the material of schemata or build upon the child's prior ethnography and to foster an environment within which the binding, interfacing, and interweaving so necessary to the learning of language can flourish.

To this end, in the very first class ask the children if they know why they are there. What is French? How do they know if someone is speaking another language? Even today in urban, and certainly in rural America, there are children who have not yet heard the target language spoken or recognized it for what it was. Let them listen; listening leads to learning. Play a familiar song which has been recorded in the target language. Bring in a native speaker--yes, on the very first day. Have a

conversation and allow the children to ask questions about it. Better yet, bring in children their own age, if they are available.

Having established that what they are hearing is a language, a means of communication, talk about where the language is spoken and by whom. Choose a place reasonably near by and ask the children, "Have you ever been to ...? If you leave right after breakfast, can you be back for lunch?" Explain that if they go to France, they will not be back in time for lunch or even for dinner, that they may even miss a week of school. Although more and more children will have traveled by air, it is still inconceivable to many that a place exists that cannot be reached by car. Explain that they cannot drive to France, that there are no bridges from here to there. Furthermore, France is a place where nobody says "Hello." Actually

they say "Hello" but they say it like this, "Bonjour." Today, you propose, you could say hello as the French do. Try it. It's fun. If people don't understand you, you can explain. This creates a motivation for using language immediately and pride in being able to do something that not everyone can do.

GET PHYSICAL

The learning of language is a physical as well as mental activity. Children have short attention spans and they need to move frequently and forcefully. They have been raised on rhymes. Research shows they are sensitive to sound and to rhythms. What distinguishes one language from another even more than its syntax, is its sound system. Capitalize on the child's natural affinity for rhythm and rhyme. Corporate America spends millions of dollars devising chants and rhymes to capture our attention and it works!

Everything from the name of a president, FRAN-COIS MI-TTER-AND, to expressions of opinion: J'aime ça (1-2); je n'aime pas ça (1-2-3-4) has an inherent rhythm. Choose and organize material to be learned based on sound and beat. This not only helps children remember (Two all beef patties, special sauce...), it keeps them active and prepares the way for reading and writing.

Counting is a physical and, therefore, rhythmic activity which can easily be put into a variety of contexts. Children learn language through association. (Never teach one thing if you can teach thirty-five.) Numbers will be put to many uses throughout the language students' lives but during the first week introduce them in a rhyming sequence. Tell the children, "We can march to the numbers because the numbers make their own music." The numbers from one

to ten actually rhyme: un-deux-trois, quatre-cinq-six, sept-huit, neuf-dix. The child can slide to the next group of numbers: o-n-ze, d-o-u-z-e, t-r-e-i-z-e, q-u-a-t-o-r-z-e, q-u-i-n-z-e, s-e-i-z-e, (they also rhyme) and jump to the double numbers: dix-sept, dix-huit, dix-neuf. For the number twenty, both arms are raised over the head.

Introduce action vocabulary by moving to the words (what I call "Word Dancing"). This is done by selecting words not for their meaning but for their initial and ending sounds and syllabic stress. The meaning of the vocabulary is obvious because it is acted out but the dramatization is accompanied by a series of sounds that match. Find the words that rhyme or that have the same beat and sing them, swing them, stamp them, clap them. For example: écoutez-écrivez-éffacez-écartez or dansez dessinez déchirez-

descendez or pincez-pensez-poussez-patinez. These words are eventually seen by the students who read them on sight. They also represent my sly way of introducing the interrogative and negative forms of verbs and verb conjugation but that is the subject of another session. The teacher is contrasting minimal pairs, the child is learning to understand and to speak, while preparing to read and to write, building an enormous vocabulary, and having a whale of a time doing it.

Word dancing can also work when playing simple games like Simon Says. Parts of the body should not be sequenced indiscriminately. Put those that rhyme together. In so doing, you can later elicit the vocabulary through rhyming pairs and again, you are preparing the student to read and to write. Some examples: la tête, le nez, la bouche, le pied...la

joue, le cou, le genou, le genou...le cou, le coude...l'oreille, l'orteil...joue, jambe, joue, jambe...les cheveux, les yeux, l'oeil, l'oeil, l'oeil, l'oeil...le front, le menton...le dos, le cou, la main, la joue...le poing, la main, poing, poing, main, main. These are repeated accompanied by aerobic and/or dance like movements.

SING!

"Madame," I say, "has a song about everything." (This is only a slight exaggeration.) I sing "Hello" and "Goodbye," my name, how I feel and about the weather and what to do in class. Where do I get these songs? I make them up. I ask the students to "Be my echo." I talk the songs through, then sing them line by line. After the song has been learned, I conveniently "forget" a line or two and the students supply the missing words.

JUST IMAGINE...

Everyone knows that children are highly imaginative. They can and will play any part. I tell the very youngest students during their first language classes that I overheard a mouse counting. I knew the mouse was French because I saw her counting kernels of corn for her dinner and she sounded like this, "Un, deux...." We then proceed to count like mice (squeaky), rabbits (fast), turtles (slow), like the strong man (this requires a lot of huffing and puffing) and a snobby lady (you have to see this to believe it). The numbers have now been put in context.

Another activity asks that children put words into the mouths of their stuffed animals. The children are told that some of their animal toys probably speak French. Of course we cannot be sure

until the animals are brought to school. I explain that some animals are very shy and may not speak in public. I begin by asking an animal which I am holding a question. Then, holding the animal to my ear, I smile broadly and nod to indicate that the animal has whispered the answer which I share with the students. Next, I ask for student volunteers. Children supply both questions and answers which is very important. How often the teacher does all the asking! The selection of both questions and answers is left open. Too much of classroom speaking is controlled by the teacher. There are some doubting Thomases, to be sure, but most of the children play right along. Learning the names of the animals, where they live and what they eat is a natural extension of this activity.

Of course imagining can be tied to the real world. Sociologists tell us that children have established routines for play and for interaction. The most appropriate content for young children is then that which is tied to that interaction and to the themes of children's play. Children learn to tell each other to behave, to be quiet, not to touch or to move, to look and to listen to each other and to the teacher. These expressions are used in and out of class. When one or two children are misbehaving, the rest of the class turns to them and says, "Sois sage Albert! Ecoute Madame, Alison!"

Situations are set within the parameter of the child's actual day but always with imagination and often with humor. "What do you say to your mother when she says, 'When are you going to clean that mess out from under your bed, eat your peas or walk the

dog?' You say, 'je ne sais pas' or 'jamais' or 'plus tard' or 'une minute' or 'demain.' What do you say when the baby's bad? (I am the baby in this case.) You say, 'Sois sage, mange tes carottes, ne pleure pas!' What does the elephant say when he steps on your toes? 'Pardon, excusez-moi.' What do you say when your double-scoop chocolate ice cream cone falls on the ground--and when someone gives you another?"

Much of children's play centers around basic fears: the death or disappearance of something or someone they love, dangers in the form of monsters, storms or accidents. Not to worry. It is they who introduce such events into their activities and they, in turn, who resolve the conflicts or crises they have created. Thus, we discuss both real and imaginary situations and how to deal with them in the target language. For example, what to say when they are

hurt, lost, sorry; what to say when they spill their soup, break a dish or meet a monster. "If your mother or the monster cannot understand, just explain that you are speaking French and help them to understand what you are saying. Not many grownups can speak French, you know." Too much of what is taught in every classroom is actually quite useless. Who cares about the door and the floor? The child's English is linguistically rather sophisticated. The classroom content and the teacher's level of creativity should at least match it.

THE PRIDE FACTOR

And speaking of monsters, mothers, and others who may not know another language, it is important for the child to know that he or she is learning something that friends at another school or even parents may not yet have mastered. I call it the "pride factor" and

one way to introduce children to it is to teach them cocktail-party vocabulary: the next time your mother has a party and the adults are standing around the dip and chips, just say "cognate" or "Francois Mitterand," or "1989" in French. Some grownups don't listen too well so you may have to repeat. Finally, they may say, "What's that, kid?" And you will have to explain that you are on your way to becoming bilingual and then "translate." (We all know what that means.) They will be amazed that you know these kinds of things and you will show how truly smart you are. Oh, and don't forget "Bon Appetit" at McDonalds.

Children can learn anything, but methods matter. Remember to make use of the sound as well as the meaning of the language, to use the known as a bridge to the unknown, to observe children closely and imitate them carefully, to laugh (laughing in the

language classroom is serious business), to teach that which can and will be used, and to capitalize on what is already happening in the child's world.

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